

**Draft  
Environmental Assessment**

**Sun River Wildlife Management Area  
Habitat Project**



**July 2015**



***Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks***

# **Draft Environmental Assessment**

## **Sun River Wildlife Management Area Habitat Project**

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### **PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION**

#### **1. Type of Proposed State Action:**

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to improve habitat conditions on big game (elk) winter range in the Sun River Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The proposed action would remove encroaching or competing Douglas fir trees from five proposed treatment units within the WMA. The treatment unit boundaries encompass a total of 465 acres; however total acreage to be actually treated would be less than this total given the target habitat types associated with this project. The proposed action is intended to improve native grass and forb production (forage) for wintering elk; improve productivity in aspen stands by removing competing conifers; improve forest health by selectively thinning Douglas fir stands impacted by insects, disease, and overcrowding; and minimize the threat of wildfire in the area by reducing fuels. Tree removal would be by hand. No new roads would be constructed. This is a non-commercial timber project.

#### **2. Need for Action:**

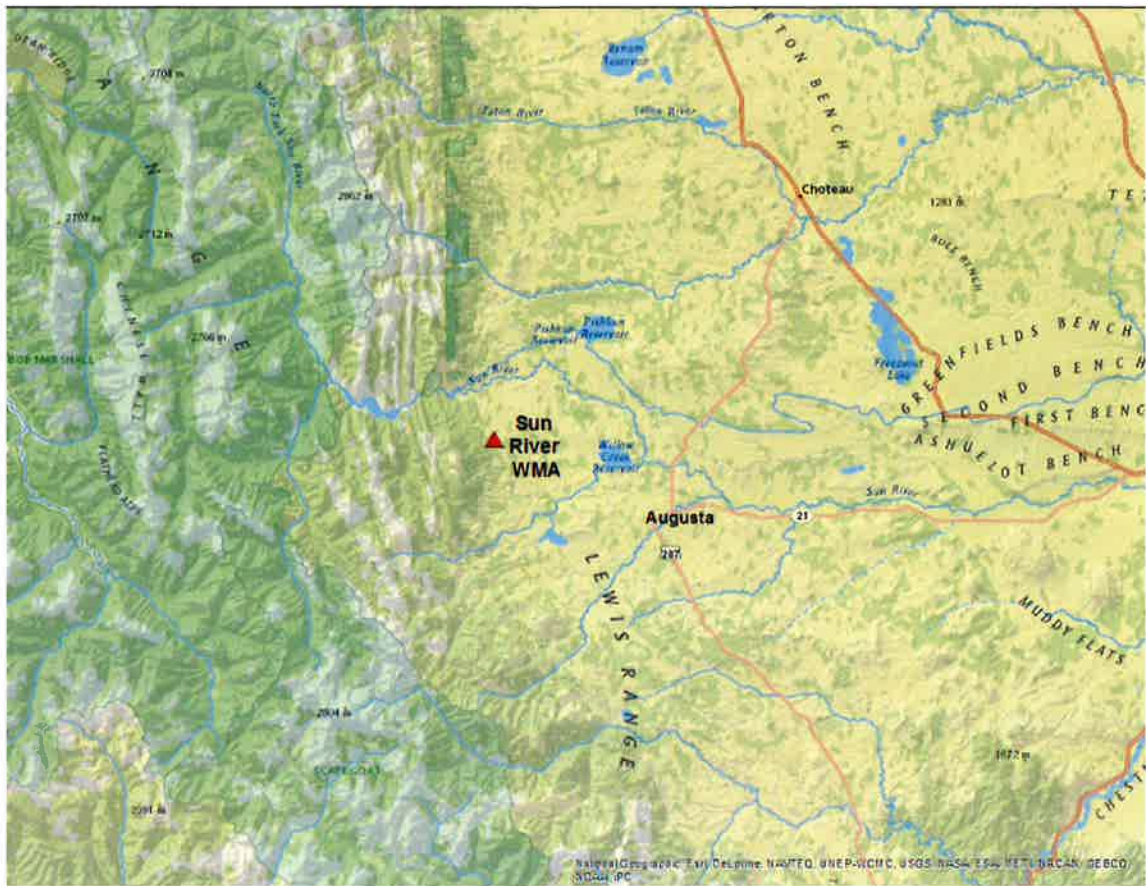
The Sun River Wildlife Management Area (WMA) was acquired in 1948 with the primary intent of being used as key winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd. In recent years, up to 95 percent of the Sun River elk herd (as many as 2,700) will be found on the WMA during the peak of the winter. Elk use objectives on the WMA are currently being met and exceeded at certain times of the winter and early spring. Attempts to increase harvest and help limit elk presence on the WMA and acquire and/or improve additional winter range habitat outside the WMA have been met with limited success.

This proposed project is one attempt to improve elk winter range on the WMA by improving habitat/forage that has become less desirable and available due to conifer expansion (primarily Douglas fir) over the last several decades. The treatment area was selected based on current elk use and distribution during the winter/early spring along with known conifer succession that has occurred in this area over the last several decades (Figure 3). One of the primary objectives of this project is to alleviate over utilized portions of the WMA by modifying elk distribution through improved winter range habitat on other portions of the WMA.

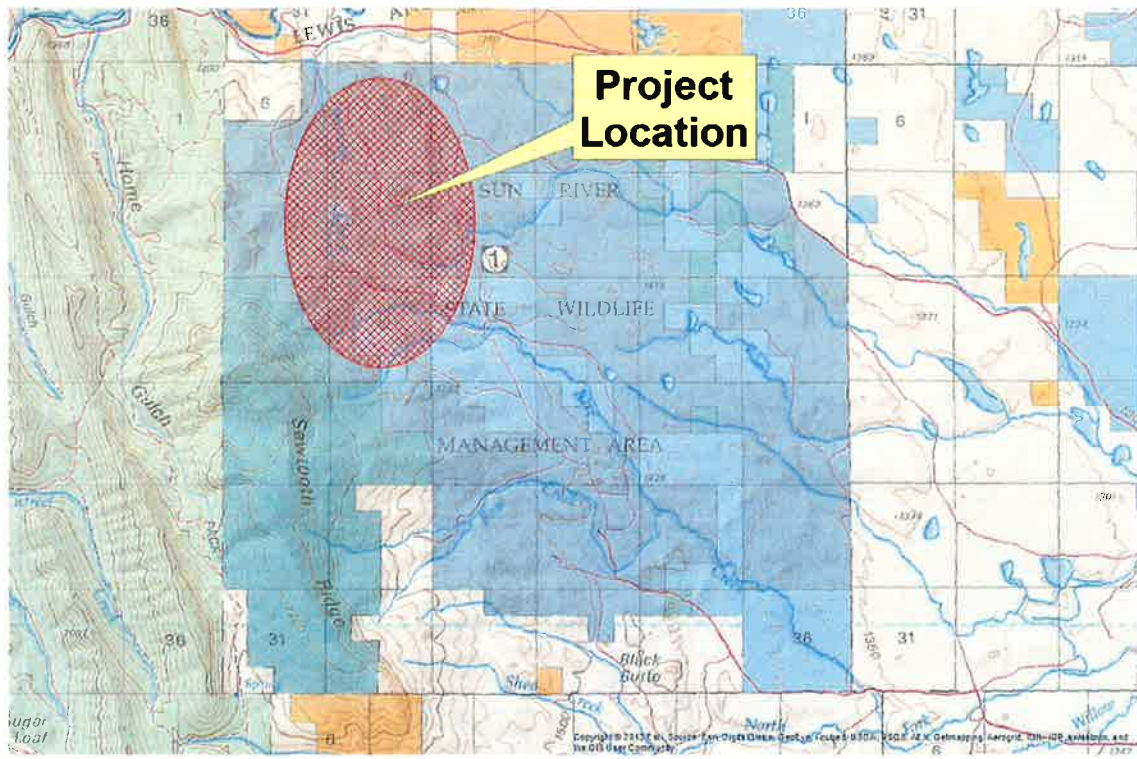
#### **3. Location of the Proposed Action:**

The Sun River WMA is located in FWP Administrative Region 4 in Lewis and Clark County. The proposed project is approximately 12 miles west of the town of Augusta; T26N, 8W (Figures 1 and 2).





**Figure 1.** Location of the Sun River Wildlife Management Area.



**Figure 2.** General Map of the Sun River Wildlife Management Area and project location.

**4. Agency authority and relevant Plans for the proposed action:**

Section 87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated (MCA) gives FWP the authority to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. The proposed habitat improvements in this assessment are intended to enhance native plant communities so that they continue to support game and other wildlife species for the public to enjoy.

Section 87-1-201 (iv), MCA requires FWP to address fire mitigation and wildlife habitat enhancement, giving priority to forested lands in excess of 50 contiguous acres in any state park, fishing access site, or wildlife management area under the department's jurisdiction.

Montana Statewide Elk Management Plan (2004). One goal specified in FWP's 2004 Elk Management Plan promotes improvement of elk habitat by maintaining vegetative diversity. The proposed project is designed to promote native grass and forb productivity and improve aspen stand health through the removal of encroaching Douglas fir on big game (elk) winter range habitat.

**5. Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency):**

None

**6. Anticipated Schedule:**

Public Comment Period: July 10 – August 10, 2015

Decision Notice Published: August, 2015

Estimated Construction/Commencement Date: September/October, 2015

Estimated Completion Date: Summer/Fall, 2022 (estimated 6-7 year project)

**Estimated project size:** The total size (perimeter) of the project area (4 treatment units) is roughly 465 acres. However, the approximate size of the actual areas to be treated within the units is identified below, approximately 200 acres.

**7.**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>&lt;5</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>~180</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>~35</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

**8. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.**

(a) **Permits:** None required.

(b) **Funding:** FWP would provide funding through its forest management account specified for these types of habitat projects and further pursuit of partnership

funding would occur. The US Forest Service would provide some in kind service and assistance pertinent to the actual field work.

**(c) Other Overlapping Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

Agency Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Type of Responsibility

US Forest Service                      Organization and carrying out proposed treatments

**9. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:**

**Alternative A: No Action**

Implement no forest management activities and status quo forest management is maintained on the WMA. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not conduct any habitat improvement projects on the Sun River WMA as outlined under this alternative. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would continue to manage the WMA for the benefit of wildlife and recreation activities. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would continue noxious weed management activities within the WMA.

**Alternative B: Proposed Action**

Fish, Wildlife & Parks would remove conifer (Douglas fir) encroachment and limit conifer establishment around the meadow edges and within/around aspen stands within the proposed five treatment units on the Sun River WMA. The treatment units are situated in the Northwest corner of the WMA and located strictly on FWP deeded property (Figures 2 and 3). Small stands of Douglas fir would remain present throughout portions of the units. Treatment unit boundaries were defined using areas such as roads and drainages that provide defensible fire lines. Approximate individual treatment unit sizes are as follows: Unit 1 – 71 acres, Unit 2 – 278 acres, Unit 3 – 68 acres, and Unit 4 – 48 acres. See Figures 2 and 3 for treatment unit locations. The target stands within the units generally comprise mosaics of bunchgrass meadows, quaking aspen and Douglas fir. Initial treatment would generally entail felling Douglas fir  $\leq 8''$  diameter at breast height (dbh) (<40 feet tall):

- Within any quaking aspen footprint and within aspen clones: Occasionally isolated larger trees may also be felled to prevent future conifer establishment. Trees would be felled and left on site with larger trees lopped and scattered. In addition, some larger trees may be girdled and/or topped and left as future tree snag use/habitat. Approximately 25 acres would be treated.
- Along the forest-meadow ecotone and within meadows: Remove up to 100% of the Douglas fir ( $\leq 8''$  dbh). Felled trees would be lopped and scattered and/or piled. Quantity of trees felled may be regulated to maintain acceptable fuel loads and prescribed fire behavior. Approximately 180 acres would be treated.

Tree felling would take place in late summer or early fall (August – early October) to avoid disturbance during the calving, fawning, and bird nesting period. Adherence to Montana's Forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) law would reduce potential impacts to water quality and prevent increased sediment flows to Buttolph and Barr Creeks. Tree removal would be by hand (no heavy equipment). Operations would be suspended during wet conditions when the ground is more susceptible to disturbance or if conditions are extremely dry and fire danger is high. Some areas may need to be accessed via off-road travel, but would be limited to OHV vehicles only.

After tree felling, controlled broadcast burning or slash pile burning would be used to reduce surface fuel loads, create conditions suitable for aspen regeneration, and remove conifer seedlings and saplings. Secondary follow up burns may be necessary in order to further meet project objectives. Spring (March-early May) and/or fall (Sept/early Oct) burning would be available as options depending on weather, ground moisture conditions and overall effectiveness of fire for the given time frame. Due to elk presence in the early spring period, special consideration will be given to any potential burning activity during this time frame. Over time, it is likely that Douglas-fir trees would resprout in areas that have been cleared and burned and another treatment effort, if desired, would need to be conducted.

**Table 1.** Estimated costs with work coordinated and completed via local USFS fire personnel.

	# Acres	Estimated # Days Felling Trees	Estimated Cost/Day Felling Trees	Estimated Subtotal	Estimated # Days Burning	Estimated Cost/Day Burning X # Acres	Estimated Subtotal	Total Estimated Cost	Total Estimated Cost/ Acre
<b>Unit 1</b>	71	14	\$600/day	\$8400	1	\$20/day	\$1420	\$9820	\$138/Acre
<b>Unit 2</b>	278	16	\$600/day	\$9600	1	\$20/day	\$5560	\$15160	\$57/Acre
<b>Unit 3</b>	68	34	\$600/day	\$20400	1	\$50/day	\$3400	\$23800	\$350/Acre
<b>Unit 4</b>	48	24	\$600/day	\$14400	1	\$50/day	\$2400	\$16800	\$350/Acre
<b>Total</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>88</b>		<b>\$52800</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>\$12780</b>	<b>\$65580</b>	<b>\$141/Acre</b>

Costs were calculated/estimated using local US Forest Service Rocky Mountain Ranger District fire personnel to coordinate and complete treatment types (felling and scattering and/or piling trees and burning). Table 1 has cost estimates calculated from local USFS personnel. Total cost of the project is estimated at \$141/acre. To help keep costs down, utilization of local USFS staff and expertise to complete the treatment types is appropriate.

It is estimated that the duration of the entire project would take 6-7 years - this is from the time the first trees are cut to the final burn treatment(s). Project timeline would be dependent on USFS staff availability from year to year to conduct tree cutting/felling work along with weather/moisture conditions.

All guidelines and recommendations for managing noxious weeds in FWP's Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan would be adhered to including 1) surveying the proposed project area prior to tree removal and thinning operations and identifying/mapping noxious weeds. The project area would be revisited a minimum of three years post-treatment, and treated for weeds as needed. And, 2) all vehicles and equipment would be power washed any vehicles and equipment prior to entering the WMA.

The project area is documented seasonal grizzly bear habitat. Limiting treatment activity in this area during peak grizzly bear use (late spring and early fall) would be prioritized as much as possible with respect to other goals/objectives of the project. Following proper food storage and bear safety requirements while working on the WMA would be required.

## **10. Monitoring and Future Management**

Fish, Wildlife and Parks Fairfield area wildlife biologist would oversee implementation of this project. Long-term monitoring of habitat conditions via permanent photo plots and vegetation transects would occur to determine if project objectives are being met. Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)

identifies several wildlife species of greatest conservation need that potentially have overlap within the proposed treatment areas for this project. In order to evaluate treatment effects on these and other non-game species, additional pertinent pre and post-treatment wildlife surveys would be conducted.







## PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

### A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?			X		No	1a
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		No/Yes	1b
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

1a. Removal of Douglas fir in some locations may cause some soil instability, especially on steeper grades.

1b. Removal of Douglas fir in some locations could cause a disruption of the vegetation cover, affecting soil moisture content and potentially giving way to additional soil erosion. The intent of this project is to return habitat similar to 1950's conditions. The short term changes are intended to turn into long term benefits to the meadow ecosystems and associated wildlife habitats. Removing trees from the system should improve soil moisture content and reduce shading for other plant species. Broadcast burning the felled and cured trees is intended to naturally improve soil and plant productivity by returning nutrients to the system.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)			X		No	2a
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regulations? (Also see 2a.)		X				

2a. Broadcast burning the felled/cured trees would cause some short term air quality concerns in the area. Burns should be relatively small in size so significant smoke/air quality concerns are not anticipated. To reduce impacts,

timing of burns would be considered with respect to adjacent landowners and WMA users. All burning would be done in coordination with Montana/Idaho Airshed Group.

3. <u>WATER</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?			X		No	1b
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?			X		No	1d
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?			X		No	1g
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				

1b. Removal of Douglas fir in some locations could cause some changes in the drainage patterns and rates which could increase turbidity. The two primary and closest streams in the project area are Buttolph and Barr Creeks. Impacts to these creeks are anticipated to be short term. By following SMZ laws, impacts immediately adjacent to streams is unlikely.

1d. Removal of Douglas fir in some locations within the project area could result in increased surface run-off that eventually may end up in Buttolph or Barr creek.

1g. Removal of Douglas fir would have some impact on the quantity of ground water since fewer trees would be available to capture and utilize this water. It is anticipated this additional water would be beneficial to other vegetation in the area and no significant additional surface run-off would occur.

4. <b>VEGETATION</b>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
<b>Will the proposed action result in?</b>						
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?				X	No	4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?				X	No	See 4a
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Yes	4e
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				

4a. Due to the primary objectives of the proposed project, there are expected positive changes in the diversity, productivity and/or abundance of certain plant species. An increase in native grass and forb abundance and productivity is anticipated once the Douglas fir canopy is opened up. Aspen stands should expand in size and vigor once competing Douglas-fir trees are removed. Reducing the stocking level of Douglas-fir forest stands would increase the overall health and vigor of the forest community and reduce the threat of insect infestations where trees are currently densely stocked. It is likely that Douglas-fir trees would resprout in areas that have been cleared, and another treatment effort, if desired, would need to be conducted in the future. There are no known observations of sensitive plant species (threatened, endangered, or state species of concern) in the proposed project area.

4e. Weed management on the Sun River WMA is guided by a weed control plan. The proposed project would be monitored for weeds as with the remainder of the WMA utilizing the same weed control measures.

5. <b>FISH/WILDLIFE</b>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X		No	5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X		Maybe	5c
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X		No/Yes	5g
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in			X			5h



which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)						
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				

5b. The primary intent of this proposal is to improve winter range habitat/forage on this portion of the WMA that has become less desirable and functional due to conifer encroachment, which has taken place over the last few decades. If successful, distribution and abundance of big game (primarily elk, but also moose and white-tail/mule deer) would increase in the project area(s) and subsequently have positive net effects on other over utilized portions of the WMA. Distribution and/or abundance of forest grouse (ruffed grouse) could also be affected if aspen stand productivity was improved.

5c. It is unknown how much impact there would be on non-game species. Some birds and small mammal species are likely to respond positively (i.e. increase in abundance and/or presence) to removal of tree canopy in the proposed treatment areas; other species are likely to decline with a reduction in canopy cover. Nongame species are also likely to respond to other habitat modifications including creation of snags, downed logs, coarse woody debris, improvement to aspen stands, and changes in shrub species composition and structure. Overall, the proposed treatments to improve forage conditions for elk are likely to create a mosaic of micro-habitat types. In general, management actions that produce habitat heterogeneity are likely to support a diverse suite of nongame species. Further pre and post treatment surveys would be completed to help evaluate the effects of the proposed project.

5g. There would be short term disturbance in the proposed treatment units due to the nature of the treatment type (chainsaw work and broad cast burning). Fewer trees also means less hiding cover for big game during established hunting seasons. Current hunting regulations are sufficient to avoid negative impacts on game species.

5h. The proposed project is within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) recovery zone for grizzly bears. Limiting treatment activity in this area during peak grizzly bear use (late spring and early fall) would be prioritized as much as possible with respect to other goals/objectives of the project. Following proper food storage and bear safety requirements while working on the WMA would continue to be required.

## B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X		No	6b
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

6b. When trees are actively selected and cut, there would be persistent chainsaw activity in the area. As proposed, this activity is would be short term from season to season and work would avoid times of peak public use (i.e., no weekend/holiday activity). Some of this activity may fall during the deer/elk archery only hunting season which may cause disturbance/modification of elk distribution in the WMA. However, elk presence in the WMA during this early fall period is normally very limited.

<b>7. LAND USE</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?			X		No	7c
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

7c. Some of this activity may fall during the deer/elk archery only hunting season which may cause disturbance/modification of elk distribution in the WMA. However, elk presence in the WMA during the early fall period is very limited. No chainsaw work is anticipated to occur during the general rifle hunting season or during the winter closure period. There is potential for some prescribed burn activity (of felled/cured trees) during the early spring period, however, this activity would be short term to limit any potential disturbance to wintering elk. Similarly, there would be potential for prescribed burn activity (of felled/cured trees) during the deer/elk archery only season which may cause short term closed areas where fire activity would be taking place.

<b>8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				

<b>9. COMMUNITY IMPACT</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
			X			9e

e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?						
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9e. There would be an increase in traffic volume during the treatment periods, but given the low level of individuals likely involved with project implementation (<10), this increase is expected to be minimal and short term.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X		No	10f

10f. Maintenance costs associated with this project would primarily be related to additional weed monitoring and treatment efforts. Weed monitoring and treatment is currently already a routine management priority on the WMA so additional effort specific to these treatment areas is expected to be minimal given the overall current good vegetative condition of the WMA.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X		No	11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings?			X		Yes/No	11c
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				



11a. Removal of conifer encroachment and eventual follow up broadcast burning of the treatment units would alter the scenic vista or aesthetics of those specific areas, depending on one's perspective. However, because the WMA is first and foremost managed as key winter elk habitat, the results and objectives of the project would have priority over other concerns. Short term aesthetic concerns should take into account long term goals.

11c. As previously noted, some of this activity may fall during the deer/elk archery only hunting season which may cause disturbance/modification on elk distribution in the WMA and direct effects on hunting opportunity. However, elk presence in the WMA during this early fall period is normally very limited. No chainsaw work is anticipated to occur during the general rifle hunting season or during the winter closure period. There is potential for some prescribed burn activity (of felled/cured trees) during the early spring period, however, this activity would be short term to limit any potential disturbance to wintering elk. Similarly, there would be potential for prescribed burn activity (of felled/cured trees) during the deer/elk archery only season which may cause short term closed areas where fire activity would be taking place.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				

## SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:						
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				13a
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?			X		No	13d
		X				

e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?						
f. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				13f
g. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , list any federal or state permits required.		X				13g

13a. The proposed action is expected to have no significant negative cumulative effects on the human, physical and aesthetic/recreational environment. The physical environment within the treatment units would experience some significant change in vegetation composition due to the removal of Douglas fir, however, the intent of these changes is to be positive with respect to the overriding objectives of the WMA. Effects on recreational opportunity are expected to be short term and there is good potential for improved recreational (hunting) opportunity once the project is completed.

13d. If the project moves forward and depending on the results of the treatments, future habitat improvement projects similar to this could be proposed.

13f. No substantial organized public opposition is expected to be generated by the proposed action. Multiple conversations have been conducted in recent years with local public and the Upper Sun Wildlife Team conservation group to conduct such a project on the WMA.

13g. FWP's WMA's are managed with wildlife and wildlife habitat conservation as the foremost concern. WMAs are also purchased with and managed by using hunting license dollars. WMA's protect important wildlife habitat that might otherwise disappear from the Montana landscape. It is the intent of this project to improve habitat conditions on the WMA for the primary reasons for which it was purchased and continues to be managed for.

### **PART III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATORS**

#### **1. Public involvement:**

This project has been discussed and supported by the Upper Sun Wildlife Team (formerly Sun River Working Group) conservation group.

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA:

- Public notices in each of these papers: *Fairfield Sun Times*, *Great Falls Tribune* and *Choteau Acantha*;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment (EA) will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. Copies of the draft EA will also be available at the Freezout Lake WMA Office.

#### **2. Duration of comment period:**

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., August 10, 2015 and can be mailed or emailed to the addresses below:

Sun River WMA Habitat Project  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
PO Box 488  
Fairfield, MT 59436                      or                      [blonner@mt.gov](mailto:blonner@mt.gov)

### **PART IV. EA PREPARATION**

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No**  
**If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

No, an EIS is not required. Based on an evaluation of the primary, secondary, and cumulative impacts to the physical and human environment, no significant impacts from the proposed action were identified. In determining the significance of the impacts of the proposed project, FWP assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. FWP assessed the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value affected; any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit FWP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws. As this EA revealed no significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

The removal of Douglas-fir trees expanding into meadow edges and aspen stands and thinning of the Douglas-fir forests would be beneficial to the core management objectives of the WMA. The duration of the actual treatment efforts would limit the impacts to wildlife and the recreating public.



- 2. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:**  
Brent Lonner, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Fairfield, MT
- 3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:**
  - Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Wildlife (Fairfield, Great Falls, Helena), Fisheries (Choteau) and Legal (Helena)
  - United States Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Ranger District, Choteau & Augusta Offices
  - Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Helena Unit, Helena, MT

## **REFERENCES**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Statewide Elk Management Plan, 2005.

Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks: Draft State Wildlife Action Plan, 2014.